

A Middle Way Video Approach to EFL Teaching

By Radu Alexandrescu

It is generally accepted that the text books we use in Romanian high schools can't possibly energize all students. Even worse, they can't inspire real motivation to learn a foreign language in spite of the new curriculum.

But now that satellite TV programs have invaded Eastern Europe, both teachers and learners can come to grips with English. The wave of new information has created an alternative method for being up-to-date in English.

After several years of experimentation, we see video as a middle way to fill the gap between passive classroom learning and live communication.

How to Make Video Work?

About five classes are required to train students to pinpoint key words and messages. Understanding meaning through the gestures they see on TV, children can work in small groups recreating scenes they viewed at home. The students are given simple narrating techniques, specific and general questions like: "What would you do if you were...?" "How do you imagine the end of the film without...?" "Can you comment on the title?"

Cartoons can be a great place to start. Each student has a film-watching card as follows:

Title	Plot
Characters	Message
Background	New Words

S/he uses this card to direct her/his viewing and to help prepare for the next class.

Few texts can match a very good cartoon or film. As 90 percent of the films shown on our national television are either British or American, the teacher's task becomes even easier. While watching a favorite film at home, students gradually ignore the Romanian subtitles or simply watch cable television-thrillers, science fiction, documentaries, and newsreels.

A Simple Checking Scheme

The class is reorganized into several groups of four or five students. Each student completes his own viewing card. The larger the choice of programs, the more interesting the discussions will be. Each group decides who is going to present the story. Here is a simple but flexible scheme:

- *Group conversation*
- *Question challenge (general and specific questions with the whole class)*
- *Cross-questioning (the whole class targets three or four selected students with "more difficult" questions)*
- *Storytelling (each group will select two storytellers)*
- *The film's "message"*

Most of the messages are synthesized in one word. This is a genuine "linguistic processing" with unpredictable results. The teacher lists the words on the blackboard.

Friendship, Nature, Love

Peace, Environment, Charity, War, Help,

Generosity, Suspicion, Beauty,

Extra-terrestrials, Suffering, Democracy,

Death, Hope, Faith

Achievements

Most of our English teachers think that elementary school pupils can't perform in English. Quite wrong. The Middle Way Video Approach appeals to the whole class and attracts even the most "distant" ones. They overcome shyness and try hard to manage in viable English. They have relatively free choice in picking their favorite topics and accept correction with no reluctance. The approach not only helps all the students to extend their contact with English but also gives them new experiences to generate new ideas (and new linguistic and aesthetic forms).

Risks and Remedies

Once in a while students may get over-involved in action or simply go all out for thrillers and violent themes. The teacher can help them with their choice of viewing. Frustration caused by not grasping the real meaning of new words can be coped with by helping students evaluate the context, and using dictionaries.

Conclusions

Breaking with old routines and making use of video viewing is quite a "lucky break" for Eastern Europe. Video viewing strengthens the grammar basis through exposure and builds confidence, getting students to open themselves to a new world.

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References

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